

Stories from Acts

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Stephanie J. Pelton

Marilynn Derwenskus

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marilynn Derwenskus". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the printed name.

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Two things have been very important to me since childhood. One is art. The other is Christianity. Despite the importance of these two things, they have never intersected. I have thought about it before; it just never really happened. Last semester I took a trip with my watercolor class to New York City. While I was there I received a booklet from an artist's studio. That booklet was entitled *Art as Prayer*. It consisted of interviews with Christian artists Makoto Fujimura and Tim Rollins. Reading about how these artists combined their Christianity and their painting really inspired me. I became determined that I would also create paintings that reflected my faith. Throughout college I have grown greatly as a Christian and a painter. I felt that combining the two would be an excellent culmination of my college career.

Once I made a decision to create art based on faith, I started to sketch Bible verses that inspired me. I initially sketched many verses from Psalms. I thought perhaps I would create abstract paintings based on chapters from the book of Psalms, so I began researching the work of many artists that painted spiritual subject matter, such as Giotto, Kandinsky, and Emil Nolde. These artists did not inspire me. I moved from there to look at Indonesian art, thinking that this was what I was looking for. Still no inspiration could be found. In the meantime, I went on a retreat. I took a seminar about Christianity and the arts. While there, we studied the story from Acts about how the Apostle Paul and his ministry partner Silas were in prison. Although they were in prison they continued to sing and pray. I had found my inspiration.

An important part of any painting is the dimension. In the interview of Fujimura in *Art as Prayer*, he talks about doing a series of paintings using the dimensions of the lid from the Ark of the Covenant. The measurement is $2\frac{1}{2}$ cubits by $1\frac{1}{2}$ cubits. One cubit is the length from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. For me, the dimensions turn out to be $43\frac{3}{4}$ inches by $26\frac{1}{4}$ inch. I was intrigued by using these dimensions for paintings. I did a practice painting and absolutely loved the dimensions. Of course, since the dimensions were dictated by God, who could not love them? I determined to use these dimensions for all of my paintings.

I chose six stories from the book of Acts. The book of Acts is found in the New Testament of the *Holy Bible*. These stories are about the beginning of the Christian church. Although I began my series with *Praying and Singing Hymns in Prison: Chapter 16, verses 16 through 34* I will be discussing the works in the order they occur in the book of Acts.

Pentecost: Chapter 2, verses 1 through 4 depicts the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Christ. This story marks the beginning of Christianity. After the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, the disciples remained silent to the world about what had occurred until the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were together in a house when the Holy Spirit came to them with tongues of fire on their heads as they began to speak in many different languages. I felt the best way to depict this was to show a large crowd, where nearly all you can see is the tops of their heads. The wall of the house had a rather orange color, depicting the glowing from the tongues of fire.

Escaping Damascus: Chapter 9, verses 23 through 25 is actually one of the last paintings I did. The Jews were trying to kill Paul (who was also known as Saul) because he had become a Christian (he had formerly persecuted them) and was preaching in the synagogues. The plot of the Jews was discovered, and the Christians in Damascus helped

Paul escape by lowering him through the city wall at night in a basket. In this painting I wanted to emphasize Paul's escape by deemphasizing him. I painted the wall of the city very dark with the silhouettes of someone being let through a window in basket. To emphasize the secretiveness of the escape, I show the gate of the city with a crowd of people with torches. These people represent the Jews. I felt that by emphasizing the "search party," I could emphasize the secretiveness of the escape.

As I stated before, *Praying and Singing Hymns in Prison: Chapter 16, verses 16 through 34* is about Paul and Silas in prison. While they were praying and singing there was an earthquake, the doors of the cells were opened, and the chains of the prisoners were loosed. This event terrified the guard, who had fallen asleep; but in the end it brought him and his household to Christ. The second half of the story is an incredible miracle. However, I wanted to focus on the joy and peace of Paul and Silas despite their situation. I feel that it can be very encouraging to anyone that is going through a hard time.

While Paul was in Ephesus, some Jews tried to cast out an evil spirit in the name of "Jesus whom Paul preaches". The evil spirit replied to them that he knew Jesus and Paul, but not these men. This was because they were not Christians, they were just using Jesus name, perhaps because they thought it was magical. After the evil spirit testified, many Jews and Greeks in Ephesus realized the awesome power in the name of Jesus Christ and became Christians. Many of these people had practiced magic. They took their books of magic and burned them in the sight of all the people. The total value of the books was worth approximately a day's wages. This story was the basis for my painting *Burning of the Magic Books: Chapter 19, verses 11 through 20*.

My fifth painting, *Before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa: Chapter 24 through 26* is a painting that depicts three stories at once. Paul was preaching in Jerusalem and this upset the Jews. They had Paul arrested. However, because he was a Roman citizen, he was entitled to a trial. Paul was sent to the governor Felix, then the governor Festus, and finally King Agrippa. Each time, Paul was allowed to defend himself. Paul took these opportunities to preach of the miracle of Jesus. In order to depict all three stories at once, I created three panels, each with a ruler in a court. To demonstrate that Paul preached to each one of these men, I made Paul very large and had him span across all three panels.

My final painting is *The Tempest: Chapter 27*. While Paul was before Festus, he appealed to Caesar. He did this because, Festus wanted to give him over to the Jews to be tried and Paul knew the Jews wanted to kill him. As the prisoner Paul was preparing to leave for Rome, God told him that the ship he was to sail in would not make it to Rome. The men in charge of the ship ignored him, and set sail anyway. Soon after setting off, a terrible storm came up. This storm is the subject of my painting. I attempted to depict the awfulness of the storm by emphasizing the vastness of the sea. The waves cover most of the painting. The ship is very tiny. The sky is very dark, and eerily colored.

These series of painting create a very small survey of the book of Acts. Although the stories may, at times, not seem to go together, I think that they work well as an overview of Acts. They show the variety that exists within the stories. The final part of this project is the show. My series of works will be displayed in the University Theatre Gallery from Monday, May 12th, through Friday, May 23rd.

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